F.B.I. Spied on Brecht For 13 Years, File Shows

By MEL GUSSOW

The Federal Bureau of Investigation conducted a surveillance of Bertolt Brecht over a period of 13 years, tapping his telephone, getting reports from informants and obtaining private letters and telegrams, while amassing hardly any politically useful information about the playwright's alleged Communist activities. The F.B.I.'s pursuit of Brecht was, according to James K. Lyon, chairman of the literature department of the University of California at San Diego, "both comic and ominous" and was not without its "Keystone Kops" comedy aspect.

Information about the F.B.I.'s file on Brecht was revealed by Dr. Lyon in a paper delivered Thursday at the International Brecht Symposium, a three-day congress at the University of Maryland. Scholars, authors, critics, theatrical directors and film makers are attending the symposium, sponsored by the National Endowment for the Humanities, the International Brecht Society and the University of Maryland.

Dr. Lyon is one of a number of scholars who in the last five years have gained access to selected documents in the voluminous 1,000-page F.B.I. file on the playwright, covering the period from 1943 until his death in 1956.

On the basis of the information drawn from 428 pages of the file, Dr. Lyon concluded, "In his associations with American leftists Brecht must have frustrated the F.B.I., for in their file they are unable to connect him to a single identifiable member of the American Communist Party — all are either suspected Communists or fellow travelers." At least three times the F.B.I. closed its case on Brecht for what Dr. Lyon called "a lack of evidence."

"Because the file does contain data that can be corroborated, as well as documents which qualify as sound primary sources," Dr. Lyon said, "it possesses a moderately high usefulness quotient in regard to Brecht's political and literary activities in American exile." He entitled his paper, "The F.B.I. as Literary Historian: The File of Bertolt Brecht."

"In its zeal to establish guilt by association," Dr. Lyon said, the F.B.I. tapped the playwright's telephone, a fact that J. Edgar Hoover "ordered" the Los Angeles field office to conceal. Apparently Brecht knew about the bugging, and, according to Dr. Lyon, took evasive measures. "In order to confuse the F.B.I.," Brecht's wife, Helene Weigel, "on at least one occasion read recipes from a Polish cookbook over the telephone to another friend who knew no Polish." That incident was not in the F.B.I. report. On Nov. 5, 1945, the F.B.I. discontinued the telephone surveillance because it was "no longer productive."

The "rarest documents" in the file, Dr. Lyon said, are transcripts of two letters and a telegram to Brecht from Ruth Berlau, his mistress and collaborator. They had corresponded frequently, but her responses were thought to have been lost. There is also a note that Brecht sent to Miss Berlau when she was in the hospital "during the seventh month of her pregnancy by Brecht."

"Such intimate expressions of tenderness are not part of the image of Bertolt Brecht which disciples and publishers have cultivated," Dr. Lyon said.

"While the literary historian can be grateful to the F.B.I. for preserving such documentary material," Dr. Lyon concluded, "one must also ask if the enormous amount of time, energy and money spent . . . and all the efforts expended on this case were justified, not to mention the moral and legal implications such an operation has. Certainly this file is one of the most expensive, not to say unusual, sources a modern literary historian will ever use." Dr. Lyon has himself used the file in preparation of an as-yet-unpublished book on Brecht's years in America.

Among the other highlights of the Brecht Symposium was the presentation of a paper entitled "Brecht's Unpublished Poems on Josef Stalin" by John Fuegi, director of the comparative literature program at the University of Maryland and the author of the book "The Essential Brecht."

According to Mr. Fuegi, three unpublished poems, discovered among Brecht's papers, demonstrate that, contrary to popular belief, Brecht was critical of Stalin. The poems characterize the Soviet leader as "the führer" and "the czar," who speaks to the people "every day of the week with guns and whips." "The poems," he said, "were written in 1956, right before Brecht's death in East Berlin. They are a last testament."

Associated American Artists

Bertolt Brecht in a woodcut by Leonard Baskin